

## A NIGHT IN THE BOX ELDER

By David Jarret

Fink Nightlinger's husband Clyde returned home from the hospital to die. A proud, sturdy man, Clyde had farmed the ninety acres surrounding the house until he became ill. He tried to keep going but, after all the meds had failed to tamp down his tumor, the doctors threw their hands up in the air and sent him home. Clyde was too weak from end stage lung cancer to harvest his corn crop this season, so a farmer neighbor drove his combine down to take care of the chore for him.

Clyde pretended to be optimistic and hopeful around Fink after the awful diagnosis was confirmed, but after months of treatment had left him exhausted and sicker than ever, a hospice nurse was assigned to his case, but it was Fink who had to do the heavy lifting. Douglas, their son, had not been around in days, so every morning, she helped Clyde get up. She made sure he got his nutrition and meds on time and kept him company while he lay propped up on the sofa with pillows. It was humiliating when Fink had to assist him in the bathroom and groom him, but he had soon come to accept her help without protest as he grew feebler by the day. Near the end, after days in bed without eating or drinking, Clyde slipped into a coma and died. Now, months after Clyde had passed on, Fink still felt pain over losing him and wept in long shuddering sobs. After so many happy years together, losing him left her with an unending void of sadness and loneliness.

Late one evening, Fink glanced outside her upstairs bedroom window before she undressed for bed. Pennants of clouds, pink and blue, wigwagged in the sky. She gazed down at Clyde's grave, a spot in the yard where she had buried his ashes between two box elder trees.

She blew a kiss from the window as she did every night, before she pulled the curtains shut. She turned on the lamp beside her bed. The house was silent. She never knew for sure when, or if, Douglas planned to come home after work. At thirty-two, he'd stuck around home longer than he should have, working on the farm with Clyde and helping after his father got sick. Douglas remained at home after his father's death to oversee the auction of the farm equipment, but now had a new girlfriend, Hattie. He naturally preferred to spend most of his time with her, and only stayed with his mother when Hattie would kick him out of the house for drinking too much and fighting.

Fink wound the little travel alarm clock on her nightstand like she did every evening before she got into bed. The sound of the clock's ticking comforted her and set her mind just right for sleeping. She had had trouble going to sleep ever since Clyde's death. She barely ate and couldn't concentrate on much, so Dr. Jester prescribed an antidepressant for her. She didn't like taking the pills, and was afraid of their potential side effects, but tried some and soon found she couldn't get through the day without them.

Fink still drove her husband's '96 Buick Roadmaster station wagon, and often let Douglas use it too, as she had tonight. She was not just lonesome but occasionally felt frightened, too. It bothered her enough that she thought about selling the farm and moving to an apartment in town. Unfortunately, land values were down, and crop prices were depressed. No one was looking to buy a farm these days, so she was stuck.

She lay on her back in bed. Douglas' spaniel Sport lay on the throw rug at the foot of her bed. A sudden loud noise startled her. Sport barked. She looked at the window and saw the outdoor lights, triggered by a motion sensor, illuminate the yard. She got up and lifted the shade

in time to see an enormous wing sail past her window and scrape the clapboards of the house. The lights suddenly went out. She thought it strange because Clyde had set them to stay on for ten minutes. She had only seen the wing for an instant and wondered if it belonged to one of those Great Horned owls she occasionally saw, or else to a bat with wings the size of a buzzard's. But no, it seemed bigger still. Really big. A chill prickled the back of her neck.

She got out of bed in the darkness and tried the lamp. Nothing. The night light in the hallway had gone out, too. A blackout. She found her slippers by the door and put them on. Sport followed her out of the room and growled. She tried some other light switches in the hall. None worked. She picked up the phone. The line was dead. She picked up her house coat off a chair, put it on, and felt her way downstairs. By touch, she found a flashlight from a kitchen drawer and went outside with Sport. He barked and raced around the yard in the circle of light. There was no moon. She shined the flashlight around the yard and up to the corner of the house where the electric and phone lines came in, but nothing looked out of place in the beam of light. Sport ran barking around the trees and out into the open yard.

A few minutes later, after having found nothing amiss, she went back inside and got into bed but was unable to sleep. An hour later the power still had not come back on. She hoped Douglas would come by. She wished she could call him. He was a good son. He had tried hard to make his own life and settle down, but things never seemed to work out for him. His shift at the trailer factory was over by now. He said he was going to see her after work, so she waited for him to come and call the electric company from his cell phone, but it may not work. The phone's booster required electricity to work.

The next morning, Fink rose from bed and went into the bathroom. She hadn't heard the door open last night, and Sport hadn't barked, so she guessed Douglas had never come home after all. She turned on the faucet to wash her face but there was no water. The well wasn't running because the power was still off. She swore a curse, a word that she hadn't uttered in years, and went downstairs to let Sport outside. When she opened the door, she was stunned by the sight of an enormous dark wing shaped like the tip of an arrow, at least fifteen feet across, resting up in the branches of one of the box elder trees. Sport barked in alarm and charged down the half-dozen steps and across the lawn to the tree. Broken branches cluttered the ground. Her first reaction was to try 9-1-1, but she could now see that the electric and phone wires from the pole out front to the house had been clipped by the plane.

She ventured out into the yard and stared up in shock at the gigantic fabric wing and a bent metal frame and realized it was a damaged ultralight airplane. The wing had been torn open by a tree branch. The plane was tilted away from the house, so she couldn't see the seat. Was there still someone aboard? Although she heard no sound, and there was no movement, she thought the pilot must still be up there and possibly dead.

"Hello?" she hollered. "Hello up there. Can you hear me?" Moments later, after hearing no response, she gathered her courage and hurried back to the house for Clyde's ladder. She found it still in the place where he had left it leaning against a wall. It was a big ladder made of lightweight aluminum. She managed to drag it down to the tree and position it up against the trunk. She climbed up the rungs when she felt the ladder suddenly slip to the side but then settled firmly against a branch. She reached for the frame of the aircraft and pulled herself up and peered around to the front of the plane, where she spied the body of the pilot facing away from her. "Hello? Are you OK?" She touched his shoulder.

The pilot stirred. "Help. Help me." His voice was weak. He turned his head, and she could see that his face was bloody. She screamed. The pilot's legs were twisted in an impossible contortion. She found the buckle to his seatbelt and released it. It fell away with a clang.

His body lurched to the side, and he struggled to free his legs. "Can you call for help, please? I've been here all night."

"Your plane took out my phone line and my electric service."

He groaned. "I have a cell phone somewhere."

"Hate to disappoint you but it won't work here."

"Can you help me get out of here?" He strained to push himself up off the seat. "Please?"

"I'll try." She pushed up his legs a few inches. He winced in pain and grimaced and slowly pulled his lower body clear of the branches. He untangled his legs and draped them over the side of the aircraft, pivoted, and crawled out of the seat. The frame shook with the motion. She was fearful the whole thing might suddenly fall to the ground, taking her and the ladder with it, but it held. She helped him place his feet on the ladder and they crept down the rungs together.

"Oh God. Thank you," he said when they got to the ground. She put her arm across his shoulders and guided him, hobbling in pain, up to the house. Tears streamed down his face and trickled away some of the blood. He took off his cap. His hair was matted with blood across his forehead.

"I knew I saw something outside last night," said Fink. "Did you see me with a flashlight looking around?"

“Must have been knocked unconscious. I kept going in and out. Got a big knot on my forehead from hitting something.”

“I can see it’s a big bump. Are you okay? I hope you don’t need an ambulance.”

“I’m battered and sore all over. Might have some broken ribs, too.”

“You’re welcome to stay here. I’ll patch you up some.”

“Thanks. Where am I?”

“Welcome to the Nightlinger farm. I’m Fink.”

“What’s that?”

“My name’s Fink Nightlinger. I live here with my son, Douglas. I expect him back soon.”

She offered him her arm and he steadied himself holding her elbow as they made their way to the house. Sport followed them. “I’m really Frances but nobody calls me anything but Fink. Always have since I was a little girl.”

“I’m Charles. I very much appreciate your help.”

When they got to the house they rested for a moment before going up the steps inside.

“Ready?” she asked. He nodded. “I imagine your family must be worried sick about you, by now.”

“I’m sure they are. Must have notified the police. Maybe they’re up in the air in the state police chopper looking for me right now.” Fink didn’t hear any aircraft. “I didn’t file a flight plan and didn’t need to, flying such a small aircraft, so it’ll be a fruitless search unless I’m incredibly lucky.”

Inside, she helped him to the bathroom. “Sorry, no water,” she said. “Well pump’s down, too.” She gave him some of the facial wipes she had left over from tending to Clyde. She was glad she had saved her husband’s medical supplies. “You can use the toilet but don’t flush.”

When he came out of the bathroom, she helped Charles into a chair at the kitchen table and lit two candles for some light to brighten up the room. He had a full head of gray hair. He spoke well and had nice manners. He resembled one of the actors she had recently seen on a *Grey’s Anatomy* re-run, rugged though handsome with gentle eyes. Thin waist. A short, stylish beard. “Feeling a little better?” she asked.

“Some, thanks.”

She went to a cabinet and pulled out a six-pack of warm Budweiser. “All I got.” She gave him a can. She shook out two pills, meds leftover from Clyde, from a yellow medicine bottle and gave them to Charles. “Here. These’ll help.” He stared at the white tablets in his palm. “With the pain. Tylenol with codeine,” she said. He thanked her and took them with a sip of beer. “I’m going to have some breakfast,” said Fink. “All I have is oatmeal. A couple of days ago I made enough for the whole week. Care to join me? I do have some fresh blueberries, too.”

“I feel starved. But cold oatmeal and warm beer? Seems like opposite day.” They both laughed. “Anyway, yes please.”

She put out two spoons and bowls on the table and took the oatmeal out of the refrigerator with a carton of milk and closed the door quickly. She set out paper napkins and sat at the table with Charles and took the aluminum foil off the bowl of blueberries. “Are you comfortable enough now, Clyde?”

“What? Who’s he?”

“Who’s who?”

“Clyde. You called me Clyde.”

“Oh dear. My late husband.” She felt her face turn red. “An innocent mistake. You’re sitting in his chair.” Charles was nothing like Clyde. Charles’ speech sounded like the King’s English. His hands were clean. Looked they’d never worked the soil. Hadn’t tended plants. Hadn’t fixed heavy equipment. Not a speck of grime. But he had a soft gaze and seemed to be a nice man. “In fact, Clyde recently died in the next room.” She pointed at the living room.

“Dear God. I’m sorry.”

“Still can’t get used to not having him around.” She filled the bowls with cereal and gave him one.

“Of course. I know, Frances. It’s hard.”

She drew a deep breath. “Don’t know as the electric company’s aware there’s no power. And the name’s Fink.” They ate in silence for a minute. “You got a radio in that plane?”

He nodded. “Battery’s dead. Couldn’t reach the accessory switch after the crash. The lights on the instrument panel were off when I came to. It’s a shame I wrecked that plane. Could probably land a 747 on your huge lawn, Fink, but I somehow managed to hit a tree. Top of the line delta wing ultralight. Only had it eight months. Motor alone cost me over ten grand.”

“Never been up in one of those things. No sides, just a little seat on a flimsy frame. Not for me.”



“It’s a wonderful way to see the world from a new point of view. There’s nothing like the freedom you feel. All your worries, your bad mood, your regrets, everything disappears while you’re up there, I swear.”

“Okay. So, what are we going to do?”

“Fink, is there any chance you could give me a ride home? Whenever it’s convenient, of course. I’d pay you for your trouble.”

“Wish I had my car, but Douglas took it.”

Charles groaned. “When’s he coming back?”

“You never know. If I could, I’d drive you over to the Gower’s farm next door in Clyde’s tractor.”

He brightened. “Could you?”

“Nope. Sold it at auction after he passed. Can’t neither of us walk it.” She ran her hands over her knees. “It’s over three miles away.”

Charles slouched in the chair. “Maybe I could thumb a ride.”

“It’s a farm road. Only gets a few cars a day. I’d give you a lawn chair to sit out front in, but you could be there for an hour before anybody comes by.”

“You have an old bicycle?” She shook her head. “Anything?”

“You’re welcome to just set here till Douglas comes. Might be in an hour or two. But you never know. Might be in a day or two.”

“A day or two!”

“Sorry. So, what happened? Why were you flying so close to sunset?”

“Stupid me, I pressed my luck. Took off from a friend’s house over in Anderson City.

The sunset looked so beautiful with the pink clouds against the dark blue sky that I had to go up and see it. I got turned around and delayed getting back. It got to be dusk, and I was lost. Low on fuel. That little tank doesn’t hold much. Anyway, I ran out of gas and had to glide in the darkness and just hope for the best. With all the open land around here, I figured I’d have no problem landing safely. I’m very obliged to you, Fink. If I’d have ended up in the woods somewhere, who knows how long I’d have been stuck and snagged on a tree. Might not have even made it out alive.”

“Yours is the first life I reckon I ever saved. How’s your pain now?”

“A little better. The Tylenol’s kicking in.”

She stirred the cold oatmeal in her bowl. “It’s not bad if you’re hungry enough.”

He picked up a spoon. “You know something Fink, I save lives every day. I’m a surgeon at Nouveau Health. Dr. Charles Hobough. No one ever had to save my life before.” Sport came up to him and lay at his feet. Charles smiled at her. “Your son. Do you really expect to see him come by today?” She shrugged. “You mean he left his mother stranded, without wheels?”

“I’m only stranded because you took out my phone line. Douglas wouldn’t have any way of knowing. He’s a good boy who’d be here anytime I called him, day or night. If I could call him.”

“Didn’t mean to insinuate anything by it. It’s just that you can imagine how badly I need to get word back to home that I’m safe.”

“I can imagine.” She suddenly got up from the table and went to the window. “Did I just hear a car?”

“Hope so.” He dropped his spoon into the bowl.

“No. Was nothing. So, Charles, do you live close by?”

“About twenty miles from here. Over in Thrushville. Bought that plane to enjoy in my retirement.” He was quiet for a minute. “You know, my wife Janine always said I’d end up getting killed if I ever bought one.”

“I’m sure your wife will be very happy that you’re still alive.”

“Janine passed away three years ago from Alzheimer’s disease.”

“I’m so sorry, Charles.”

“Poor woman. It was a terribly hard death. Hate to say it but she’s in a better place, as they say.”

“Any kids?”

“Two. Grown and gone. One still in college.” Charles blotted his eyes with the napkin and looked away. “Tell you what, when I get back home, I’m going to do something nice for you. Flowers, maybe. Gift certificate for two at Lamar’s. It’s the best restaurant in Anderson City.”

“For two?”

“Well, you know, for you and Douglas.”

“That’s not necessary. I mean it’s nice of you but he’s not the type. He’d never enjoy it.”

“Still, I’d like to do something nice for you.”

“Clyde never took me to Lamar’s, but he used to buy me flowers once in a while, after we were first married.”

“I’m not going to ask for your hand, Fink.” He laughed.

The sun was up. Blushing, she leaned over the table beside him and blew out the candles. “I’m going upstairs.”

“All right. I’ll wait here with Sport.” He reached down and scratched the dog behind his ears.

When Fink came back downstairs dressed, she saw Douglas speaking with Charles. “I’m the pilot who crashed the plane into the tree,” said Charles. “Your mom’s been very kind to me.”

“Douglas,” said Fink. “Thank goodness you’re back.” She rushed up to him and grasped his hands and kissed him.

“Mom, you all right?”

“Had quite a surprise this morning, as you can see,” she said.

“I noticed. That big wing was the first thing I seen when I drove up. Crazy. You call the cops?”

“There’s no power.” She flipped the light switch.

“I took down the lines with the plane,” said Charles. “Your mother helped me out of that wreck and got me inside the house.”

“You get hurt?” asked Douglas. “Fugly looking bruise you got on your forehead.”

“Yeah, I know.” Charles touched his head.

“Well, I’ll call an ambulance.” Douglas took out his phone. “Ugh. That’s right. Zero bars. Well, you need to see a doctor.”

“I am a doctor.”

“You’re lucky I came home when I did. Mom, Hattie threw me out again.”

“Thank God for Hattie then,” Fink said. “Douglas, will you please take Charles home to Thrushville?”

Charles slowly rose up out of the chair, took out his wallet, and handed Douglas fifty dollars. “For gas money and for your trouble. Thank you for the breakfast too, Fink, and for your graciousness.” He hugged her.

“You’re welcome.” She patted him on the back. “I’m glad you’re okay, Charles.”

“I’ll be back for the plane as soon as I can.”

“Let me know when you’re going to come. I’ll make you a better meal for lunch.”

The next day, after Douglas had driven Charles home, the electric company repaired the lines to her house. Fink was relieved to be able to finally cook again and enjoy a hot bath. That afternoon, an insurance adjuster came and asked to see the wreckage. He told her they would send out a crew to remove Charles’ aircraft.

Early one morning, a couple of days later, a flatbed truck and a crane arrived with six men. She went outside to watch them work. Charles hadn’t called her yet. She was disappointed but didn’t really think he would. Life goes on. Workmen dressed in orange vests and wearing

hardhats climbed the tree and placed slings around the metal frame. The crane lifted the plane up. A little black box tumbled out. After they secured the wreckage with thick cables and drove it off the farm. She hunted for the small item that had fallen out of the plane and discovered it was Charles' cell phone. She turned it on, but the phone was locked. She'd never asked him for his address, so she decided she'd keep the phone if she ever heard from him.

Fink was about to go upstairs and get into her work clothes when she heard the whine of an engine outside. It sounded like the buzz of a chainsaw. The sound came closer. She went outside and looked up and spotted an airplane overhead. It circled the house twice and descended. She could clearly see the struts holding up the wings. She watched while it came in closer and closer and touched down on her lawn about a hundred yards away. It was not a hang glider but a real plane with sides and a top. The plane rolled to a stop and the engine cut off. A moment later one side of the top opened and a man hopped down. He walked toward her holding a bouquet of flowers wrapped in yellow cellophane.

“I told you I'd be back, Fink Nightlinger.”

“Charles!”

He smiled when he handed her the flowers. “You look nice.”

“You look better, too.” She thanked him for the flowers and went inside to place them in a vase. When she returned, she handed him his cell phone.

Outside, he kissed her on the cheek. “Would you like to join me for brunch at Lamar's?”

“I'd love to. But Douglas has my car.”

Charles held her hand. “Step up here and hop into the backseat. I promise I’ll have you home before dark.”